

Recruiting and Engaging Older Members

Introduction

AmeriCorps members over 55?

Yes! Although many people associate VISTA and AmeriCorps with college-aged students, most programs are open to people 17 or 18 and older.

This tutorial will allow you to think about how you can engage older members in your community. In particular, you will gain recruitment tips and think about how you can best utilize older members in your projects.

Engagement

Age is experience

Men and women over 55 bring unique and valuable experiences, knowledge, and skills to the programs and communities they serve.

Programs have tapped the experience of people who have worked in:

- Education
- Business
- Community organizing
- Law
- Government
- Social services
- The military

But what if you're a rural or small community where there aren't many professional potential members in this age range?

Joyce Fosdick, who directs Keystone SMILES AmeriCorps in rural Pennsylvania, talks about the benefits the older members from her community bring to her program:

We just don't have a large professional elderly population. Most of our seniors are retired from being a service provider. So, you know, their resources are limited, but their commitment to community is high. When we do recruit and have members that are senior age or baby boomer age, that ethic development that maybe we have to work so hard with our younger population makes it much easier because they serve as mentors or role models just in being an example to what AmeriCorps is supposed to be all about.

Engagement

In my community

Take a minute to write down what you know about people 55 and older in your area. Do you have quite a few career switchers? Do you have a large retirement community? Why might they be interested in your program?

What Older Members Bring to Service

Addell Anderson, program director for the Michigan AmeriCorps Partnership in Detroit, Michigan, shares her thoughts:

Older members bring understanding and life to the dynamics and the complexity of issues that younger ones don't necessarily see. They bring reality to the theory that younger members learn in school.

Recruitment

Why join?

Older members bring knowledge and experience to a program. But they can also gain as much as they give.

Some reasons older people are motivated to become members are to:

- Strengthen community through giving back
- Switch careers
- Share knowledge and skills
- Connect with other generations
- Meet new people and stay active
- Learn new skills
- Receive the education award or VISTA end-of-year stipend
 - If older VISTAs are worried about how to use their education award, let them know they have options. They can use the education award to:
 - [Begin or complete a degree](#)
 - [Take continuing education classes](#)
 - In fact, the education award encourages lifelong learning. For those in VISTA, they can choose between the education award or the end-of-year stipend.
- Get a living allowance. Visit americorps.gov to learn more about the benefits members receive.

Joyce Fosdick and Vicki Ginda, director of AmeriCorps Polk Reads (Bartow, FL), have many older members in their programs. Here's what they have to say about the intangible benefits older members get from service:

Vicki: They want to give back because they realize the hardships that they've gone through and how people have helped them. And they want to give back. And in our stream of service it's something that they can easily do.

Joyce: It's also a safe and nurturing environment for them. Because it's a small environment, you know, they're not intimidated, sometimes in large groups. And I think that's also an important aspect of that. They have a lot to give, but I think it's a reaffirmation of their value. When you have a commitment and when you feel valued you have a reason to always feel good.

Vicki: Well, older people learn from the youth too. And it's been a real eye opener for some of my tutors this year that have just reentered the work force. And they didn't understand how children could get out of school and not know how to read. Now that they've worked with children one-on-one and experienced, they understand why children can get to the sixth grade and not know how to read. But in turn they understand the importance of having a program like AmeriCorps and our tax dollars supporting a program like AmeriCorps so that they can work one-on-one with a child and get them those basics that they don't have for whatever reason. It opens their eyes to what's really happening. They have a chance to go back in time and help from the beginning with the young ones and to make things better in each one of our communities. These tutors come and serve in our program. They understand where their tax dollars are going to work. And that makes a big difference legislatively, and hopefully they can become people who will be contacting their legislators, saying, "Hey, it's important that we still spend money on programs like AmeriCorps."

Find older members

You can find older members in many areas of your community—they could be:

- Volunteers in your partner organizations
- Grandparents or parents of service recipients
- Service recipients themselves

Here are other ways programs have found older members:

- Ask partner organizations to refer volunteers or recent retirees
 - Partners know your program and who would be a good fit for you
 - Talk to the volunteers themselves
- Create [press releases](#) to run as stories in neighborhood newspapers
- Advertise in retiree-focused newsletters and magazines
- Make presentations to clubs and groups with older members, such as:
 - Churches
 - Lions, Rotary and other civic clubs
 - Volunteer organizations
 - Senior centers or retirement communities
- Invite seniors to program events and activities

- Recruit from local Senior Corps programs

Joyce Fosdick holds a monthly senior breakfast or lunch-and-learn:

We do senior breakfasts with our youth. So once a month they invite seniors down and they tell them about the program and they get them involved in maybe a project. So that's one of the ways that we sort of do outreach.

Sometimes you don't have to look for older recruits. Vicki Ginda describes how they came to her program:

They find me. And it may be because of the means of advertising that I did for our positions. We do press releases that go to the large newspapers, but it goes on a blast email. The community relations department for Polk County Schools does it for me. And consequently when it goes to those big emails, it goes out to all the little neighborly, small neighbor newspapers, and they'll run it and run it and run it. And that is where I generally recruit my older Members from, because they read those little newspapers—they're free, they have more time, they don't just pick them up and throw them away, and they read those. And I always start out with, "How would you like to change the life of a child?"

In My Community

List three organizations in your community where you could recruit older members.

Addell Anderson uses this recruitment practice:

I go to the nonprofits we serve. There are older people already there serving as volunteers. They never thought that AmeriCorps could be an option for them. They're concerned that AmeriCorps benefits might affect other benefits they receive, but when they find out that's not the case, they're very interested.

Utilize Experience

Older members as role models

Older members can be role models to both the populations they serve and serve with. In some cases, they may have an entire career's worth of expertise to bring to your organization and community.

So use their experience to your advantage! Vicki Ginda describes how she's done just that:

I just had a Member recently that's working on one of the modules. And she is a former executive from a company; she has so many marvelous organizational skills, and she's very well read. Well, they happen to be doing one on how to critically read a newspaper. And she is like, "What am I going to get from this?" She's really kind of

angry at me because she's serving on this committee. "This means nothing to me, and I already know about this, and what am I going to get from this?" And I had to say to her, "Well, then please, use your expertise to reach out to the other members—many of these younger people who have never read a newspaper or taken the time to critically read a newspaper or an editorial—and talk to them about your life experiences. So, please be the teacher in this aspect."

Addell Anderson shares:

I have a new member who is retired from 35 years in the social services department. She joined AmeriCorps because it would allow her to volunteer full-time. Because of her expertise in this area, she was able to bring her site up to code in terms of social service policies and regulations. Here she comes in as a member and provides them with this expertise, writes a handbook for them, and changes their entire organization.

Your Turn

You've learned about how some programs recruit and engage older members.

Now it's your turn. Write your own thoughts and begin planning how to get older members into your program!

- How can you let people 55 and over know about your program?
- Why would they be interested in becoming a member in your program?
- Where can you find potential older members in your community?

Conclusion

My older members tend to be engaged in their community. They're president of the block club. They write or call the mayor, go to city council meetings, and stay informed. Their involvement helps younger members see citizenship is more than just voting, and helps them find other ways to get involved and have their voices known to elected officials.
(Addell Anderson)

In this tutorial we looked at reasons why older members join AmeriCorps and VISTA and how to find them in your communities. Programs that utilize this population speak to their many strengths. Including older members in your recruitment efforts will diversify your team, increase your pool of applicants and bring new knowledge to your organization.

Our experts

The content of this mini-tutorial was developed based on contributions from the following AmeriCorps programs:

- Joyce Fosdick, executive director, Keystone SMILES AmeriCorps (Knox, PA)
- Addell Anderson, program director, Michigan AmeriCorps Partnership (Detroit, MI)
- Vicki Ginda, program director, AmeriCorps Polk Reads (Bartow, FL)

Resources

Resources referenced in the tutorial:

- [AmeriCorps](#)
- [AmeriCorps Education Award](#)
- [Alternative uses of Education Award](#)
- [Recruiting Retirees Press Release](#)

Learn more about engaging and keeping older members with these resources:

- [Center for Intergenerational Learning, Temple University](#)